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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6170
INFO ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
HQ USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
USSOCOM INTEL MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000227

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, AND NEA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [AMGT](#) [KPAO](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SARG CONCURS: THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE CENTER IS TO REOPEN

REF: A. DAMASCUS 223 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 192

[1](#)C. 08 DAMASCUS 803

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) The Syrian government (SARG), through a diplomatic note received by post March 26, concurred with Post's plan to reopen the American Language Center (ALC), a sub-component of the American Cultural Center (ACC). Both activities had been ordered closed by the SARG in late October 2008 following an alleged U.S. raid on a site in eastern Syria. The decision was previewed by Syrian Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustafa to NEA A A/S Feltman March 21 and then formally conveyed in Damascus during a banner week for U.S.) Syrian bilateral relations; during the same week, the SARG facilitated the work of an OBO-led team seeking sites for a new embassy compound, allowed us to establish a channel between our consular section and the MFA to discuss American Citizen Services issues, including a long-standing child custody case, and followed up on an issue raised (ref A) notal) during A A/S Feltman's and NSC Senior Director Dan Shapiro's March 7 meeting with FM Walid al-Muallim. The ALC issue was also raised by A A/S Feltman and post followed up with a diplomatic note stating our "intention" to reopen the ALC before May 1 (ref B).

[1](#)2. (C) The reopening of the ALC, on a date yet to be determined between post and Amideast, represents the first reversal of the SARG's orders last year to close three U.S. Embassy functions (ALC, ACC, and the Damascus Community School) DCS). Local media erroneously reported for several days that the pending MFA concurrence would include the ACC and DCS. The SARG has not provided any indication as to when it would agree to the reopening of either of the two remaining institutions. The ALC, which trains approximately 9,000 students during the average year, is considered by many to be the top English-language training facility in Damascus. Despite the positive news regarding the reopening, there remain potential hurdles involving the acquisition of residence permits and other permissions for the mother-tongue training staff.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: The SARG's decision on the ALC, like the other developments this week, is clearly intended by the SARG to be seen as part of its response to U.S. efforts under the new administration to re-engage with Syria. Syria's positive responses, including the breaking of a logjam of long duration on visas for TDY and other USG employees, no doubt come at least in part to NEA's more routine communications with the Syrian Embassy in Washington and to the recent granting of safety-of-flight and other export licenses to U.S. and Western firms seeking to do business in Syria as allowed under U.S. sanctions. The manner through which the SARG's concurrence was obtained -- asking the SARG to concur with our stated "intention" to reopen -- validates a post-developed strategy that leverages USG visits and avoids putting the USG into the position of demandeur for decisions that the SARG ought to make as a function of its own stated

desire for a better relationship. One down, two to go.

CONNELLY